BURNING DAYLIGHT By Jack London

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

"BURNING DAYLIGHT" — Elam Harnish—is introduced to the reader as he enters a Circle City dance hall, saloon and gambling house like the whirlwind that he is. All the others in the place are "pikers" alongside this vast figure of a man, who dares everything to win his own way.

Possessed of a tidy fortune and sure of making a vast one, Burning Daylight proceeds to stir up the life of the gambling house. The men and women all admire him, for he is of the type that dominates, and he, conscious that in everything, physical and mental, he is the superior of the assemblage, undertakes to arouse enthusiasm.

Essentially a man's man, Burning Daylight resents, or rather fears, the wiles of the women who frequent the dance hall. He is sought by all of them, persistently by one. But he is afraid to be even civil to a woman, because he dreads the idea of being mastered by anybody or anything, and to surrender to a woman meant, in his mind, that he was conquered.

Drink leads to boasting, and in the turmoil that follows Burning Daylight shows his amazing muscular strength. He wins all the tests and downs all the giants that come before him.

Then comes a poker game—the greatest ever played in the Klondike. Burning Daylight's luck deserts him at the end, and he rises from the table penniless—worse than broke.

Then the indomitable courage of this master among men shows itself. He declares himself in readiness to accomplish an impossible task—to run the mail to Dyea and back with a dog team.

"I swore in '88 I'd never go out till I'd made my stake," he exclaims, "and I swear once more, by the mill tails of hell and the head of John the Baptist, I'll never hit for the outside till I make my pile, and I tell you-all, here and now, it's got to be an almighty big pile."

And so Burning Daylight goes forth, over the frozen, trackless wastes, while behind him bets are made and taken on the chances of his returning inside of sixty days. For they all know he will return. He is Burning Daylight, the man who never turns back.

As the indomitable man goes on his way the difficulties that come to him seem too vast to be overcome, and one by one his hardy Indian companions and his dogs succumb to the terrific hardships of the Alaskan winter. But Burning Daylight compels the weakening men and dogs to keep on the trail, and Dyea is reached. The return trip is even more terrible, but Burning Daylight wins, and the old crowd is in the Tivoli to greet him after his sixty days of magnificent accomplishment.

That night there is a dance, and the marvellous man outdances the men—and the women, too. In the morning the men he has chosen for his partners start on the trail again for the newest gold strike.

Dominating them in all things, Burning Daylight puts heart in the weak, leads the way into the illimitable future—and fortune.

He looked about him anxiously for signs of belief, but found himself in a circle of incredulous faces.

CHAPTER VIII. *(Continued).*

LIFE was a liar and a cheat. It fooled all creatures. It had fooled him, Burning Daylight, one of its chief and most joyous exponents. He was nothing—a mere bunch of flesh and nerves and sensitiveness that crawled in the muck for gold, that dreamed and aspired and gambled, and that passed and was gone. Only the dead things remained, the things that were not flesh and nerves and sensitiveness, the sand and muck and gravel, the stretching flats, the mountains, the river itself, freezing and breaking year by year down all the years. When all was said and done it was a scurvy game. The dice were loaded. Those that died did not win, and all died. Who won? Not even Life, the stool pigeon, the arch capper for the game—Life, the ever flourishing graveyard, the everlasting funeral procession.

He drifted back to the immediate present for a moment and noted that the river still ran wide open and that a moose bird perched on the bow of the boat was surveying him impudently. Then he drifted dreamily back to his meditations.

There was no escaping the end of the game. He was doomed surely to be out of it all. And what of it? He pondered that question again and again.

Conventional religion had passed Daylight by. He had lived a sort of religion in his square dealing and right playing with other men and he had not indulged in vain metaphysics about future life. Death ended all. He had always believed that and been unafraid. And at this moment, the boat fifteen feet above the water and immovable, himself fainting with weakness and without a particle of strength left in him, he still believed that death ended all and he was still unafraid. His views were too simply and solidly based to be overthrown by the first squirm, or the last, of death fearing life.

He had seen men and animals die, and into the field of his vision, by scores, came such deaths. He saw them over again, just as he had seen them at the time, and they did not shake him. What of it? They were dead, and dead long since. They weren't bothering about it. They weren't lying on their bellies across a boat and waiting to die. Death was easy, easier than he had ever imagined; now that it was near the thought of it made him glad.

A new vision came to him. He saw the feverish city of his dream, the gold metropolis of the North, perched above the Yukon on a high earth bank and far spreading across the flat. He saw the river steamers tied to the bank and lined against it three deep, he saw sawmills working and the long dog teams, with double sleds behind, freighting supplies to the diggings. And he saw, further, the gambling houses banks, stock exchanges, and all the gear and chip and markers, the chances and opportunities, of a vastly bigger gambling game than any he had ever seen. It was sure hell, he thought, with the bunch a-working and that big strike coming, to be out of it all. Life thrilled and stirred at the thought and once more began uttering his ancient lies.

Daylight rolled over and off the boat, leaning against it as he sat on the ice. He wanted to be in on that strike. And why shouldn't he? Somewhere in all those wasted muscles of his was enough strength, if he could gather it all at once, to up-end the boat and launch it. Quite irrelevantly, the idea suggested itself of buying a share in the Klondike town site from Harper and Joe Ladue. They would surely sell a third interest cheap. Then, if the strike came on the Stewart, he would be well in on it with the Elam Harnish town site; if on the Klondike, he would not be quite out of it.

In the meantime he would gather strength. He stretched out on the ice full length, face downward, and for half an hour he lay and rested. Then he arose, shook the flashing blindness from his eyes, and took hold of the boat. He knew his condition accurately. If the first effort failed, the following efforts were doomed to fail. He must put all his rallied strength into the one effort, and so thoroughly must he put all of it in that there would be none left for other attempts.

He lifted, and he lifted with the soul of him as well as with the body, consuming himself, body and spirit, in the effort. The boat rose. He thought he was going to faint, but he continued to lift. He felt the boat give, as it started on its downward slide. With the last shred of his strength he precipitated himself into it, landing in a sick heap on Elijah's legs. He was beyond attempting to rise, and as he lay he heard and felt the boat take the water. By watching the tree tops he knew it was whirling. A smashing shock and flying fragments of ice told him that it had struck the bank. A dozen times it whirled and struck, and then it floated easily and free.

Daylight came to and decided he had been asleep. The sun denoted that several hours had passed. It was early afternoon. He dragged himself into the stern and sat up. The boat was in the middle of the stream. The wooded banks, with their base lines of flashing ice, were slipping by. Near him floated a huge uprooted pine. A freak of the current brought the boat against it. Crawling forward, he fastened the painter to a root. The tree, deeper in the water, was travelling faster, and the painter tautened as the boat took the tow. Then, with a last giddy look around, wherein he saw the banks tilting and swaying and the sun swinging in pendulum sweep across the sky, Daylight wrapped himself in his rabbitskin robe, lay down in the bottom and fell asleep.

When he awoke it was dark night. He was lying on his back and he could see the stars shining. A subdued murmur of swollen waters could be heard. A sharp jerk informed him that the boat, swerving slack into the painter, had been straightened out by the swifter moving pine tree. A piece of stray drift ice thumped against the boat and grated along its side. Well, the following jam hadn't caught him yet, was his thought as he closed his eyes and slept again.

It was bright day when next he opened his eyes. The sun showed it to be midday. A glance around at the faraway banks and he knew that he was on the mighty Yukon. Sixty Mile could not be far away. He was abominably weak. His movements were slow, fumbling and inaccurate, accompanied by panting and head swimming, as he dragged himself into a sitting-up position in the stern, his rifle beside him. He looked a long time at Elijah, but could not see whether he breathed or not, and he was too immeasurably far away to make an investigation.

He fell to dreaming and meditating again, dreams and thoughts being often broken by stretches of blankness, wherein he neither slept nor was unconscious nor was aware of anything. It seemed to him more like cogs slipping in his brain. And in this intermittent way he reviewed the situation. He was still alive and most likely would be saved, but how came it that he was not lying dead across the boat on top the ice rim? Then he recollected the great final effort he had made. But why had he made it? he asked himself. It had not been fear of death. He had not been afraid, that was sure. Then he remembered the hunch and the big strike he believed was coming, and he knew that the spur had been his desire to sit in for a hand at that big game. And again, why? What if he made his million? He would die, just the same as those that never won more than grubstakes. Then again, why? But the blank stretches in his thinking process began to come more frequently and he surrendered to the delightful lassitude that was creeping over him.

He roused with a start. Something had whispered in him that he must awake. Abruptly he saw Sixty Mile, not a hundred feet away. The current had brought him to the very door. But the same current was now sweeping him past and on into the down river wilderness. No one was in sight. The place might have been deserted, save for the smoke he saw rising from the kitchen chimney. He tried to call, but found he had no voice left. An unearthly guttural hiss alternately rattled and wheezed in his throat. He fumbled for the rifle, got it to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. The recoil of the discharge tore through his frame, racking it with a thousand agonies. The rifle had fallen across his knees, and an attempt to lift it to his shoulder failed. He knew he must be quick, and felt that he was fainting, so he pulled the trigger of the gun where it lay. This time it kicked off and overboard. But just before darkness rushed over him he saw the kitchen door open and a woman look out of the big log house that was dancing a monstrous jig among the trees.

CHAPTER IX.

TEN days later Harper and Joe Ladue arrived at Sixty Mile, and Daylight, still a trifle weak, but strong enough to obey the hunch that had come to him, traded a third interest in his Stewart town site for a third interest in theirs on the Klondike. They had faith in the upper country, and Harper left downstream with a raft load of supplies to start a small post at the mouth of the Klondike.

"Why don't you tackle Indian River, Daylight?" Harper advised at parting. "There's whole slathers of creeks and draws draining in up there, and somewhere gold just crying to be found. That's my hunch. There's a big strike coming, and Indian River ain't going to be a million miles away."

"And the place is swarming with moose," Joe Ladue added. "Bob Henderson's up there somewhere; been there three years now, swearing something big is going to happen, living off'n straight moose and prospecting around like a crazy man."

Daylight decided to go Indian River a flutter, as he expressed it; but Elijah could not be persuaded into accompanying him. Elijah's soul had been seared by famine, and he was obsessed by fear of repeating the experience.

"I jest can't bear to separate from grub," he explained. "I know it's downright foolishness, but I jest can't help it. It's all I can do to tear myself away from the table when I know I'm full to bustin' and ain't got storage for another bite. I'm going back to Circle to camp by a cache until I get cured."

Daylight lingered a few days longer, gathering strength and arranging his meagre outfit. He planned to go in light, carrying a pack of seventy-five pounds and making his five dogs pack as well, Indian fashion, loading them with thirty pounds each. Depending on the report of Ladue, he intended to follow Bob Henderson's example and live practically on straight meat. When Jack Kearns' scow, laden with the sawmill from Lake Linderman, tied up at Sixty Mile, Daylight bundled his outfit and dogs on board, turned his town site application over to Elijah to be filed, and the same day was landed at the mouth of Indian River.

Forty miles up the river at what had been described to him as Quartz Creek, he came upon signs of Bob Henderson's work, and also at Australia Creek, thirty miles further on. The weeks came and went, but Daylight never encountered the other man. However, he found moose plentiful, and he and his dogs prospered on the meat diet. He found "pay" that was no more than "wages" on a dozen surface bars, and from the generous spread of flour gold in the muck and gravel of a score of creeks he was more confident than ever that coarse gold in quantity was waiting to be unearthed. Often he turned his eyes to the northward ridge of hills and pondered if the gold came from them. In the end he ascended Dominion Creek to its head, crossed the divide and came down on the tributary to the Klondike that was later to be called Hunker Creek. While on the divide, had he kept the big dome on his right, he would have come down on the Gold Bottom, so named by Bob Henderson, whom he would have found at work on it, taking out the first pay gold ever panned on the Klondike. Instead, Daylight continued down Hunker to the Klondike, and on to the summer fishing camp of the Indians on the Yukon.

Here for a day he camped with Carmack, a squaw-man, and his Indian brother-in-law, Skookum Jim, bought a boat, and with his dogs on board drifted down the Yukon to Forty Mile. August was drawing to a close, the days were growing shorter, and winter was coming on. Still, with unbounded faith in his hunch that a strike was coming in the Upper Country, his plan was to get together a party of four or five, and if that was impossible at least a partner, and to pole back up the river before the freeze-up to do winter prospecting. But the men of Forty Mile were without faith. The diggings to the westward were good enough for them.

Then it was that Carmack, his brother-in-law, Skookum Jim, and Cultus Charlie, another Indian, arrived in a canoe at Forty Mile, went straight to the gold commissioner and recorded three claims and a discovery claim on Bonanza Creek. After that, in the Sourdough saloon that night, they exhibited coarse gold to the sceptical crowd. Men grinned and shook their heads. They had seen the motions of a gold strike gone through before. This was too patently a scheme of Harper and Joe Ladue's, trying to entice prospecting in the vicinity of their town site and trading post. And who was Carmack? A squaw-man. And who ever heard of a squaw-man striking anything? And what was Bonanza Creek? Merely a moose pasture, entering the Klondike just above its mouth and known to old timers as Rabbit Creek. Now, if Daylight or Bob Henderson had recorded claims and shown coarse gold they'd known there was something in it. But Carmack, the squaw-man! And Skookum Jim! And Cultus Charlie! No, no; that was asking too much.

Daylight, too, was sceptical, and this despite his faith in the Upper Country. Had he not only a few days before seen Carmack loafing with his Indians and with never a thought of prospecting? But at eleven that night, sitting on the edge of his bunk and unlacing his moccasins, a thought came to him. He put on his coat and hat and went back to the Sourdough. Carmack was still there, flashing his coarse gold in the eyes of an unbelieving generation. Daylight ranged alongside of him and emptied Carmack's sack into a blower. This he studied for a long time. Then from his own sack into another blower he emptied several ounces of Circle City and Forty Mile gold. Again for a long time he studied and compared. Finally he pocketed his own gold, returned Carmack's and held up his hand for silence.

"Boys, I want to tell you-all something," he said. "She's sure come—the up-river strike. And I tell you-all, clear and forcible, this is it. There ain't never been gold like that in a blower in this country before. It's new gold. It's got more silver in it. You-all can see it by the color. Carmack's sure made a strike. Who-all's got faith to come along with me?"

There were no volunteers. Instead, laughter and jeers went up.

"Mebbe you got a town site up there," some one suggested.

"I sure have," was the retort, "and a third interest in Harper and Ladue's. And I can see my corner lots selling out for more than your hen scratching ever turned up on Birch Creek."

"That's all right, Daylight," one, Curly Parsons, interposed soothingly, "You've got a reputation, and we know you're dead sure on the square. But you're as likely as any to be mistook on a flim-flam game, such as these loafers is puttin' up. I ask you straight, when did Carmack do this here prospectin'? You said yourself he was lyin' in camp fishin' salmon along with his Siwash relations, and that was only the other day."

"And Daylight told the truth," Carmack interrupted excitedly. "And I'm telling the truth, the gospel truth. I wasn't prospecting. Hadn't no idea of it. But when Daylight pulls out, the very same day, who drifts in, down river, on a raft-load of supplies, but Bob Henderson. He'd come out to Sixty Mile, planning to go back up Indian River and portage the grub across the divide between Quartz Creek and Gold Bottom"——

"Where in hell's Gold Bottom?" Curly Parsons demanded.

"Over beyond Bonanza, that was Rabbit Creek," the squaw-man went on. "It's a draw of a big creek that runs into the Klondike. That's the way I went up, but I come back by crossing the divide, keeping along the crest several miles and dropping down into Bonanza. 'Come along with me, Carmack, and get staked,' says Bob Henderson to me. 'I've hit it this time, on Gold Bottom. I've took out forty-five ounces a'ready.' And I went along, Skookum Jim and Cultus Charlie, too. And we all staked on Gold Bottom. I come back by Bonanza on the chance of finding a moose. Along down Bonanza we stopped and cooked grub. I went to sleep, and what does Skookum Jim do but try his hand at prospecting? He'd been watching Henderson, you see. He goes right slap up to the foot of a birch tree, first pan, fills it with dirt and washes out more'n a dollar coarse gold. Then he wakes me up and I goes at it. I got two and a half the first lick. Then I named the creek 'Bonanza,' staked Discovery and we come here and recorded."

He looked about him anxiously for signs of belief, but found himself in a circle of incredulous faces—all save Daylight, who had studied his countenance while he told his story.

"How much is Harper and Ladue givin' you for manufacturing a stampede?" some one demanded.

"They don't know nothing about it," Carmack answered. "I tell you it's the God Almighty's truth. I washed out three ounces in an hour."

"And there's the gold," Daylight said. "I tell you-all boys they ain't never been gold like that in the blower before. Look at the color of it."

"A trifle darker," Curly Parson said. "Most likely Carmack's been carrying a couple of silver dollars along in the same sack. And, what's more, if there's anything in it, why ain't Bob Henderson smoking along to record?"

"He's up on Gold Bottom," Carmack explained. "We made the strike coming back."

A burst of laughter was his reward.

"Who-all'll go pardners with me and pull out in a poling boat to-morrow for this here Bonanza?" Daylight asked.

No one volunteered.

"Then who-all'll take a job from me, cash wages in advance, to pole up a thousand pounds of grub?"

Curly Parsons and another, Pat Monahan, accepted, and, with his customary speed, Daylight paid them their wages in advance and arranged the purchase of the supplies, though he emptied his sack in doing so. He was leaving the Sourdough when he suddenly turned back to the bar from the door.

"Got another hunch?" was the query.

"I sure have," he answered. "Flour's sure going to be worth what a man will pay for it this winter up on the Klondike. Who'll lend me some money?"

On the instant a score of the men who had declined to accompany him on the wild goose chase were crowding about him with proffered gold sacks.

"How much flour you want?" asked the Alaska Commercial Company's storekeeper.

"About two ton."

The proffered gold sacks were not withdrawn, though their owners were guilty of an outrageous burst of merriment.

"What are you going to do with two tons?" the storekeeper demanded.

"Son," Daylight made reply, "you-all ain't be'n in this country long enough to know all its curves. I'm going to start a sauerkraut factory and combined dandruff remedy."

He borrowed money right and left, engaging and paying six other men to bring up the flour in half as many more poling boats. Again his sack was empty and he was heavily in debt.

Curly Parsons bowed his head on the bar with a gesture of despair.

"What gets me," he moaned, "is what you're going to do with it all."

"I'll tell you-all in simple A B C and one, two, three." Daylight held up one finger and began checking off. "Hunch number one, a big strike coming in Upper Country. Hunch number two, Carmack's made it. Hunch number three, ain't no hunch at all. It's a cinch. If one and two is right, then flour just has to go sky high. If I'm riding hunches one and two, I just got to ride the cinch, which is number three. If I'm right, flour'll balance gold on the scales this winter. I tell you-all boys when you-all get a hunch play it for all it's worth. What's luck good for if you-all ain't to ride it? And when you-all ride it, ride like hell. I've been years in this country just waiting for the right hunch to come along, and here she is. Well, I'm going to play her, that's all. Good night, you-all; good night."

CHAPTER X.

STILL men were without faith in the strike. When Daylight, with his heavy outfit of flour, arrived at the mouth of the Klondike he found the big flat as desolate and tenantless as ever. Down close by the river Chief Isaac and his Indians were camped beside the frames on which they were drying salmon. Several old timers were also in camp there. Having finished their summer work on Ten Mile Creek they had come down the Yukon bound for Circle City. But at Sixty Mile they had learned of the strike and stopped off to look over the ground. They had just returned to their boat when Daylight landed his flour, and their report was pessimistic.

"Damned moose pasture," quoth one, Long Jim Harney, pausing to blow into his tin mug of tea. "Don't you have nothin' to do with it, Daylight. It's a blamed rotten sell. They're just going through the motions of a strike. Harper and Ladue's behind it and Carmack's the stool pigeon. Who ever heard of mining a moose pasture half a mile between rim rock and God alone knows how far to bed rock?"

Daylight nodded sympathetically and considered for a space.

"Did you-all pan any?" he asked, finally.

"Pan hell!" was the indignant answer. "Think I was born yesterday? Only a chechaquo'd fool around that pasture long enough to fill a pan of dirt. You don't catch me at any such foolishness. One look was enough for me. We're pulling on in the morning for Circle City. I ain't never had faith in this Upper Country. Head reaches of the Tanana is good enough for me from now on, and, mark my words, when the big strike comes she'll come down river. Johnny, here, staked a couple of miles below Discovery, but he don't know no better."

Johnny looked shamefaced.

"I just did it for fun," he explained. "I'd give my chance in the creek for a pound of Star plug."

"I'll go you," Daylight said promptly. "But don't you-all come squealing if I take twenty or thirty thousand out of it."

Johnny grinned cheerfully.

"Gimme the tobacco," he said.

"Wish I'd staked alongside," Long Jim murmured, plaintively.

"It ain't too late," Daylight replied.

"But it's a twenty mile walk there and back."

"I'll stake it for you to-morrow when I go up," Daylight offered. "Then you do the same as Johnny. Get the fees from Tim Logan. He's tending bar in the Sourdough and he'll lend it to me. Then file in your own name, transfer to me and turn the papers over to Tim."

"Me, too," chimed in the third old timer.

And for three pounds of Star plug chewing tobacco Daylight bought outright three five hundred foot claims on Bonanza. He could still stake another claim in his own name, the others being merely transfers.

"Must say you're almighty brash with your chewin' tobacco," Long Jim grinned. "Got a factory somewheres?"

"Nope, but I got a hunch," was the retort, "and I tell you-all it's cheaper than dirt to ride her at the rate of three plugs for three claims."

But an hour later at his own camp Joe Ladue strode in fresh from Bonanza Creek. At last non-committal over Carmack's strike, then, later, dubious, he finally offered Daylight a hundred dollars for his share in the town site.

"Cash?" Daylight queried.

"Sure. There she is."

So saying, Ladue pulled out his gold sack. Daylight hefted it absent mindedly, and, still absent mindedly, untied the strings and ran some of the gold dust out on his palm. It showed darker than any dust he had ever seen, with the exception of Carmack's. He ran the gold back, tied the mouth of the sack and returned it to Ladue.

"I guess you-all need it more 'n I do," was Daylight's comment.

"Nope; got plenty more," the other assured him.

"Where that come from?"

Daylight was all innocence as he asked the question, and Ladue received the question as stolidly as an Indian. Yet for a swift instant they looked into each other's eyes, and in that instant an intangible something seemed to flash out from all the body and spirit of Joe Ladue. And it seemed to Daylight that he had caught this flash, sensed a secret something in the knowledge and plans behind the other's eyes.

"You-all know the creek better 'n me," Daylight went on. "And if my share in the town site's worth a hundred to you-all with what you-all know, it's worth a hundred to me whether I know it or not."

"I'll give you three hundred," Ladue offered desperately.

"Still the same reasoning. No matter what I don't know, it's worth to me whatever you-all are willing to pay for it."

Then it was that Joe Ladue shamelessly gave over. He led Daylight away from the camp and men and told him things in confidence.

"She's sure there," he said in conclusion. "I didn't sluice it or cradle it. I panned it, all in that sack, yesterday on the rim rock. I tell you you can shake it out of the grass roots. And what's on bedrock down in the bottom of the creek they ain't no way of tellin'. But she's big, I tell you, big. Keep it quiet and locate all you can. It's in spots, but I wouldn't be none surprised if some of them claims yielded as high as fifty thousand. The only trouble is that it's spotted."

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TO BE CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.